

Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Monday 26 October 2020 at 6.30 pm (Online virtual meeting).

PRESENT: Councillor Peter Babudu (Chair)
Councillor Anood Al-Samerai
Councillor Richard Leeming
Councillor Eliza Mann
Councillor Jason Ochere (Reserve)
Councillor Michael Situ
Lynette Murphy-O'Dwyer (co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Jasmine Ali, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools
Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Jobs, Culture and Skills

OFFICER SUPPORT: Everton Roberts, Head of Overview and Scrutiny (Acting)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Martin Brecknell and Councillor Eleanor Kerlake (maternity leave). Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Eliza Mann.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no late items.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Councillor Jason Ochere declared that he was a school governor in the borough of Lewisham for which a significant number of Southwark residents attended.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 July 2020 be approved as a correct record.

5. REVITALISATION OF HIGH STREETS AND TOWN CENTRES - SCRUTINY REVIEW PREPARATIONS

The chair explained that as part of the scrutiny review the commission was particularly interested in understanding the current challenges that high streets and town centres are facing both long standing and in the context of Covid.

Nicole Gordon outlined the experiences of businesses in the Bankside area in the current climate. Nicole reported on footfall which was down 50% for the time of year, impact of people working from home, area heavily reliant on office workers, occupancy of hotels and impact on the hospitality sector and consumer facing businesses, such as pubs, restaurants and gyms of which 91% were now open. Theatres still remained closed.

Nicole also reported on redundancies, particularly in the hospitality sector, businesses downsizing as not needing as much space or trying to reduce costs, end of furlough and grants scheme and business rate holidays coming to an end.

Nicole informed the meeting of the main concerns coming from businesses which was whether they could survive over the coming months due to the long period where businesses, particularly hospitality sector would not see customers at the levels that they are used to and need in order to continue. There was also confusion for office based businesses around guidelines from central government on what businesses can and can't do, and concerns around employee wellbeing, for those who need to come into the office due to not having right working environment at home.

In respect of challenges that may be facing high streets like those in Bankside, there was the worry of empty spaces on high streets, impact of permitted development rights legislation which would see commercial properties being lost to residential.

Opportunities to explore – next generation businesses that can fill gaps created by larger companies reducing property portfolio or moving out of central London locations may provide opportunities for next generation businesses, entrepreneurs, young people and community organisations who may be able to fill those spaces to make sure high streets remain animated. She stressed that she did not think this would be possible without intervention from bodies such as local authorities who would be able to work with landowners and developers and be able to think creatively about a sustainable recovery to the high street and to breakdown barriers for groups who might not otherwise have opportunities.

The commission also heard from Councillor Stephanie Cryan, Cabinet Member for Jobs, Culture and Skills who provided an overview of the Council's action plan on revitalising high streets and town centres. The commission also heard from Danny Edwards, Strategy and Partnerships Manager and Aileen Cahill, Head of Culture.

Questions and discussion arose around the following:

- Recreating spaces to provide opportunity for creative industries to thrive on the high street
- STRIDE - Work being undertaken alongside Lewisham, Lambeth and Wandsworth (4 borough strategic investment pot bid) to provide affordable workspace, training and startup support in the Tech and creative industries and to look at how to get more diversity into those sectors. Formerly called South London Innovation Corridor, now known as Stride
- Questions around the specifics of the action plan and resources to be made available
- Managing outdoor space through winter months
- Mapping of areas being covered, particularly mini local economies
- Concept of Town centre plan around small areas within Southwark – Funding and governance
- Use of meanwhile spaces and impact on planning and development of residential spaces
- Creative compacts
- Providing support to businesses to enable them to reconfigure in changing landscape.

6. CHILDREN RETURNING TO SCHOOL

The commission received a progress update in respect of children returning to school from Councillor Jasmine Ali, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools. The commission also heard from Cassie Buchanan, Headteacher of Charles Dickens Nursery and Primary School in Borough and lead on a Trust which covers the two Charter Schools in Dulwich, and Helen Ingham, Headteacher of Ivydale School, Suley Muhidin, officer lead for Southwark Youth Council and Sydney and Peter, from Southwark Young Advisors.

Councillor Jasmine Ali reported that school children for primary, nursery and secondary schools all returned at the beginning of September. Attendance was around 90% which was higher than anticipated and children were pleased to be back. Councillor Ali reported that the local authority had widened some pavements and closed some streets in order to help schools implement new ways of working in light of Covid.

One of the issues that had let the system down was the lack of track and trace and some teachers had been sent to Leicester to get testing. Councillor Ali reported that she had written a number of letters to Government but none of them had been answered. She was confident that now track and trace and testing came under the remit of Public Health that there would be improvement.

There had been caution with parents around coughs and colds, but these concerns were being addressed by schools, clinical assessments and GP referrals. Schools were following up on absences, calling and visiting homes along with, early help back school teams and social workers.

There had been an increase in parents opting for home education but schools were working hard to dissuade parents from this option. Attendance monitoring was being undertaken by DFE through daily submissions and information was being reported back

weekly.

In respect of pupil behaviour and wellbeing all schools had prepared carefully for welcoming pupils back and had a significant focus on mental health and wellbeing as part of the enhanced PHSE curriculum. In the beginning phase of Covid a free mental health service had been opened online, in August a drop in service became available.

A number of measures had been put in place to reduce contact between individuals, including bubbles, staggered start and finish times and staggered play and lunch times.

In terms of Covid cases, whilst there had been an increase in numbers, the majority of schools had had no cases and the numbers in primary schools were significantly lower than secondary schools.

Education advisors were in place to provide advice and support where appropriate. The education department was helping schools with communication and there were weekly updates going from the council to the schools and the Director of Education was meeting regularly with the regional schools commissioner.

The council had purchased laptops and delivered to disadvantaged children due to delay in government issuing laptops. Following the allocation of the laptops from government it was found that more were still needed.

In terms of concern over the attainment gap, a Task and Finish Group had been set up to look at what has been working in schools, and sharing that information around.

The council had agreed alongside other local authorities, a scheme to help provide school children with meals during half term holiday.

Councillor Ali also raised concern over the proposal to stop free bus fares for children.

Cassie Buchanan, reported on a number of factors impacting on the delivery of education and challenges faced by schools.

Ms Buchanan highlighted that the equalities that already existed within a school and across schools had become more stark during the pandemic and if schools just did things universally, those children who are very well supported at home would continue to rise at a greater pace in contrast to children who don't have the holistic support around them or who were less ready when they started school. Ms Buchanan advised that the focus at the moment was not necessarily about closing in school gaps, but looking at how disadvantaged children are performing in Southwark and also what the national 'other' picture was looking like, and then considering how to close the gap between children who are socially disadvantaged in Southwark and then nationally all other children.

Ms Buchanan recommended that the council and schools look at the networks and organisations that Southwark has to support the work needed. Examples of this was the Education Endowment Foundation which funds a number of schools across England (including Charles Dickens School) and promotes and disseminates what works best in schools. This was something that not many boroughs have (only three in London). It was for the council to consider how best it used these organisations. There was also the London South Teaching School Alliance which had 50 member schools across Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham and a lot of work is funded, or schools individually contribute to a subscription and this service also provides some of the school improvement work.

Ms Buchanan suggested that one of the questions the commission should take away is how do you give school leaders the headspace and a capacity to do the school improvement work as schools have been so busy making arrangements for children to return to school and keeping schools open, working to keep bubbles open and working to keep parents engaged. Teachers she spoke to were saying, they want to improve reading, cultural capacity, want to work with their communities, but how do they achieve this when they are working around the clock to keep schools open, safe for children and staff and finding replacements when staff are not in school – how can organisations that already exist be best utilised. There was also the challenge of keeping staff attendance high.

Ms Buchanan also highlighted the issue of special needs, she advised that there was an increasing number of children joining reception with diagnosed or undiagnosed special needs, particularly autism. Due to Covid parents had not been able to utilise the organisations that would usually be available, or have access to the networks that they might have had access to previously to direct them to the right type of school to meet their children's needs.

Helen Ingham explained that throughout the pandemic they had used principles of trying to keep things sustainable and manageable. She advised that what was key for schools was staff and the well being of staff and leadership. There was an impact on staff, particularly in terms of an increased workload, for example a teacher having to manage teaching a class during the day, but also having to provide home learning for a child who is shielding and trying to keep that child part of the school community as well. There was also the need to acknowledge the personal impact of individuals and of their experience around their own mental health or the mental health of their families, or families who have experienced Covid directly. One of the biggest issues facing schools was around staff absence, either because of their own symptoms or household symptoms, particularly for multi occupancy households which typically affected younger teachers who live with many other people and had to stay off school because a member of their household had tested positive or had symptoms.

Ms Ingham also reported that there were also situations where staff have had their own children's classes closed or their child's nursery has shut completely when a member of staff has tested positive. This had a financial impact on schools due to the need for staff cover. There was also a financial impact in relation to pregnant members of staff who would normally work until near their due dates who were now, under current guidelines, having to have adaptations from 28 weeks onwards because the recommendation from public health was that they shouldn't be teaching from 28 weeks onwards.

It had been identified that the greatest needs was within the younger age groups. The older children had come back very positively and whilst there were gaps in knowledge, which was directly related to missing aspects of teaching, these could be easily addressed. There were bigger aspects of learning missing, particular with years 1 to 3, so that was where funding was being targeted in order to address this.

Children's mental health had been fine at Ivydale School. There were already support systems in place and the school had kept in touch with vulnerable children on a weekly basis through lockdown. It had been noticed that there was a lot of anxiety from parents – Ms Ingham suggested that this may be something the scrutiny commission might want to look at.

Suley Muhidin, reported on the formal communication networks that existed and outlined some of the challenges that a lot of young people were experiencing currently. He advised that due to Covid, it had not been possible to elect a new Southwark Youth Council, but that constant communication had been kept up with the previous Youth Council members and they had been working closely on various activities. There was also the London Youth Assembly which was set up a year ago and mirrors the Assembly in the GLA, and has two representatives [young people aged between 14 and 19] from each London borough. These connections enabled him to reflect on the challenges experienced in Southwark, but also across London as well.

Suley informed the commission that the top three things that had been reported as most challenging through the pandemic for young people were, education, mental health and employment. Since the pandemic the Council had been working closely with an organisation, 'Step Up To Serve' which set up the 'I Will' campaign which was around getting more young people to do more social good. A toolkit had been developed for young people locally to look at some of the things that they can be doing to keep themselves engaged during lockdown, based around activities such as suggestions for books to read, keep fit regimes and other things one might be able to do at home. What came back from this as a challenge was the issue of space, for example, where siblings had to share bedrooms, or no access to a garden.

In terms of education, there was the issue of digital access (access to laptops), whilst young people may all have a smartphone, they may not have access to a laptop or computer, or may have to share with other household members, siblings or parents etc who may also be required to work from home. This posed a real challenge in terms of accessing things around education.

Suley reported on the issue of transitioning from secondary school and having aspirations to go to university. For some young people, it had become a question of considering whether to seek secure employment, which in the current climate was a challenge, along with being aware of the experience of their parents, older friends/family relatives who had been either furloughed or lost their jobs, or to stay in education and potentially receive a poor quality education/university experience due to not physically being at university and not having that full university experience and personal development. Due to this a lot of young people had decided to put further education on hold and instead stay at home and seek employment which was difficult to find in the current climate.

Suley advised that another challenge was young people having a space that was away from home, a physical space where they could build on their aspirations. What had emerged through the lockdown period was that young people had to be more innovative and more resourceful and require space to create, such as music, arts or crafts.

Peter and Sydney, Southwark Young Advisors informed the commission of their experience and experience of their peers during lockdown.

Peter reported that he and his peers had not been able to take their GCSE exams and now that they were in sixth form and preparing for A levels, self-confidence had been lost through not having had the GCSE exam experience. He also reported that it had been hard to revert back to the work ethic that they [year elevens] had had before lockdown.

Sydney informed the commission that one of the challenges young people were facing was the issue of adaptability, due to the constant change in the delivery of education, virtual online learning and then returning to school and then again back to virtual learning.

Students were finding it hard to adjust. Sydney also reported that isolation was an issue as well, along with children's safety after school which was an ongoing issue.

Sydney expressed that a lot of opportunities for young people had been missed, not only through not being able to sit their GCSEs but also a lot of projects that were being run for young people have had to be put on pause.

Following the presentations from the invited guests, the commission then asked questions.

The following was identified by the invited guests as issues they felt the commission might want to take forward

- Releasing headspace for school leaders to enable them the capacity to focus on school improvement tasks.
- Supporting student transitions, including SEN (from nursery to apprenticeships) getting them ready for the next stage – what is there in Southwark to support students.
- Management of place planning and support to parents (particularly in relation to SEN), so that parents are picking the right school for their child (over capacity of SEN provision – difficult to manage). Also issue of parents not being able to visit schools due to pandemic.
- Linking schools into networks (local and national) to enable the sharing of best practice and planning
- The provision of a physical space(s) for young people who are not able to focus at home and need a space for extra and independent learning (libraries are currently closed).
- Provision of online virtual learning spaces to enable students to be able work together.
- Provision of reliable home broadband connections to facilitate virtual learning

7. WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21

The following issues arose during the discussion on the work programme:

- Special educational Needs and vision for people with disability
- What help the council can offer young people around exams – for children taking exams and increased home learning
- Providing space for young people to study (online and or physical)
- Helping schools to deliver online learning – provision of devices and broadband access (possibly mobile access)
- Funding and provision of special educational needs
- Role of Council in partnership working – bringing people together and making connections (education and businesses)
- Care leavers provision for higher education
- Equalities and Diversity Programme
- Follow up on school exclusions work

RESOLVED:

That the work programme as at 26 October 2020 be noted.

**8. EDUCATION RESPONSE TO EXCLUSIONS AND ALTERNATIVE PROVISION -
REPORT FROM THE EDUCATION AND BUSINESS SCRUTINY COMMISSION**

The Chair provided the commission with a brief update on the discussion that was held at the 20 October cabinet meeting in respect of the cabinet response to the scrutiny commissions report on Exclusions and Alternative Provision.

RESOLVED:

That the cabinet response to the report from the education and business scrutiny commission in relation to exclusions and alternative provision be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.28 pm

CHAIR:

DATED: